

From Trauma to Triumph: Enemy Images and Discourses of Victimhood before and after the Second Karabakh War. The case of Azerbaijan

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Introduction

Can war resolve a long-standing nationalist conflict? Since the end of the Second Karabakh War in November 2020, Azerbaijani politicians have repeatedly asserted that the conflict that began in the final years of the USSR is over. However, not only did the political regime begin actively investing in the creation of a discourse of triumph and 'glorious victory' in this "War for Fatherland," but it also continues to actively support discourses of victimhood and construction of enemy image. For decades, such discourses and images have been used as a resource to legitimise power and the trend is set to continue.

Revenues from the oil and gas trade are not only spent on large-scale construction and reconstruction of infrastructure, the maintenance of a huge bureaucratic apparatus, the police, and the army. This same revenue source continues to finance the installation of numerous monuments throughout the country, installation of new museums, promotion of enemy image, and the victim discourse. After a short pause in the 1990s, when more monuments and museums were dismantled and closed than were opened, by the 2000s, the country experienced a new wave of construction of memory sites. This was undertaken in the context of the new stage in nationalization of public spaces and the legitimization of the Aliyev political regime. As a result, numerous public political monuments and museums became propaganda tools and visual symbols of officially approved images of victims and enemies. The authorities also actively support and develop the art of public rituals. One of the most popular rituals developed in recent years has been the genre of a military parade.

1990-2020: Key Events and Images

The two key events behind the memory politics of independent Azerbaijan are the the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the establishment of the Aliyev hereditary political regime in 1993. (Waal 2003; Ottaway 2003; Rumyantsev 2017). One of the main characteristics of memory politics is that the rigid authoritarian regime, aspiring to be the only political actor with the power to produce the past, seeks to fully control the public spaces and to marginalize opponents that have a claim to contribute to production of public discourse. In the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War, the president's family, which holds all the political and economic power in the country, seeks to monopolise the image of the authors of the military victory.

Aleida Assman, through a successful metaphor of the "long shadow of the past", points to "the aspect of the unfreedom of subsequent generations from the traumatic past and the impossibility to deal with it at will" (Assman 2006: 16). The control over the memory of 1918-1920, namely the attempts to establish the first Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) in the aftermath of collapse of the Russian Empire (Swietochowski 1985), was presented a challenge to the ruling regime. The control over the memory of the first Nagorno-Karabakh War of 1992-1994 and of the ongoing conflict has also been hard to maintain, despite the regime's best efforts.

Among the main strategies of mastering the past, to paraphrase Michalski, are *the industry of production of political public monuments*, museums, enemy images, and related discourses of victimhood as well as the organization of collective/ mass ceremonies and rituals under the patronage and control of the authorities. The questions that this paper aims to answer are borrowed from Aleida Assman: "who remains outside the cultural memory? What are the principles of inclusion and exclusion? These questions are necessarily related to questions of acquiring and maintaining power, which means that the change in power relations will also produce a change in the structure of cultural memory" (Assman 2009: 35).

March Genocide of 1918 and Black January of 1990: Victimhood Discourses

1918 acquired a central status in the collective memory of post-Soviet Azerbaijan. One can observe a rare unity of interpretations among not only the authorities and the political opposition, but also the general public of the country. In late March and early April 1918, Muslims led by the Musavat party, on the one side, and the Bolsheviks in alliance with Armenian national military units led by members of the Armenian nationalist party Dashnaksutyun, on the other side engaged in violent clashes. The clashes resulted in pogroms and the massacre of the Muslim population of the city. No precise data is available, but the death toll alone may have surpassed 8,000 people (Swietochowski 1985: 135-139; Baberowski 2003: 132-141).

These events, the memory of which was suppressed during the Soviet Years, were remembered in January 1990, when the struggle for power between the Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA) and the Soviet administration began in Baku, resulting in Armenian pogroms and a military operation by the Soviet Army. As a result of the pogroms dozens of Baku Armenians died, many hundreds were wounded, thousands lost their property and became refugees (Waal 2003: 89-95). On the night of 19 to 20 January, the Soviet authorities launched a military operation to regain control over the republic. As a consequence, over 100 people were killed and hundreds more wounded. While the Armenian pogroms remained beyond the borders of the national memory, the Soviet military action was immediately designated as "Black January" or "Bloody January", and became a key site of memory in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The January 22 funeral for the city residents who died as a result of the military invasion (the Armenians who died in the pogroms were not counted among them) turned into a mass action of grief and protest (Azerinform 1990). The victims, proclaimed martyred heroes or *shahids*, were buried on the site of the old Chamberekent cemetery, where many of the victims of the March 1918 massacre were buried. It was on this same site that the Kirov Park was built in the mid-1930s. In January of 1990, the reconstruction of the park into a *Shahidlyar Khiyabany* (an Alley of Martyrs) began.

These two events received a status as pillars of national memory for a number of reasons. The events of Black January and of March 1918 formed the basis of the origin myth about the heroic struggle of the Azerbaijanis for Independence. The Shahids of January and of March became the symbols of patriotism and the sacred victims whose blood should be used, to paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, to water the tree of freedom. As a 2019 editorial stated: "The heroism of our sons and daughters who gave their lives for their homeland has become a legend. After all, they paved the path on our road to freedom. It is, first and foremost, these shahids to whom we owe for the restoration of state independence, and our free life" (Azertaj 2019).

The events of January have become an important component of president Heydar Aliyev's official biography, giving him a heroic halo. At that time, the future "national leader", who was dismissed from power as a Soviet era leader in 1987, lived in Moscow as a retiree. He stepped back into the spotlight following the January events. Immediately after the events, Aliyev appeared at the office of the representative of the Azerbaijan SSR in Moscow and publicly, in front of cameras, condemned the military operation by the Soviet authorities. "This step of the great leader gave our people energy and strength, [and became a source] of support and comfort" (ibid). Soon after, Heydar Aliyev returned to politics. In the official biography of the "great leader" and national hero, written and published at a later date, the January performance was highlighted as evidence that in late 1990s and early 1990s the republic was mired in chaos and violence because of his absence from politics.

Both events also fit into the context of the modern Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the confrontation with the Armenians who acquired the status of the "historical enemy". In 1998, Heydar Aliyev signed a decree "On genocide of Azerbaijanis". This is a detailed document listing the numerous "atrocities of Armenians" committed throughout the twentieth century. By this decree, 31 March is declared the "Day of the Genocide of Azerbaijanis". Thus, the historization of modern conflict is declared as the official policy of the Azerbaijani authorities. The main memorial complex was created in the city of Guba (north of Azerbaijan), where a mass grave was discovered in 2007. It was identified as the remains of the victims of the 1918 genocide. Speaking at the opening ceremony, the president stated that: "More than 50,000 of our fellow citizens became victims of Armenian fascism in a matter of five months" (Aliyev 2013). Through this rhetorical device, the commemoration of the 1918 events, the constructions of enemies (the collective image of Armenians) and their victims (Azerbaijanis) were discursively linked to the events of World War II and the Holocaust. In turn, the Shahidlyar Khiyabany, had become a multifunctional memorial complex, including the memory of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Since the early 1990s, the complex has included a cemetery where soldiers who died during the First Karabakh War (1992-1994) and were awarded the title of national heroes (Milli gəhrəmanlar) are buried.

Commemoration of the long-lasting conflict: trauma and triumph

In the context of memory politics, many events of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict occupy a central role. Numerous commemorations are linked to the ongoing conflict producing collective trauma, and to a lesser extent, collective triumph (Akhundov 2017). The ranks of shahids are also constantly expanding. April 2016 and July 2020 were marked by escalations in Nagorno-Karabakh that resulted in the deaths of dozens of soldiers. But even in the years that did not see such escalations, dozens of military personnel and civilians die amid the violations of the ceasefire. Given the length and intensity of the conflict, these deaths became part of the living memory for many generations of the country's population (Akhundov 2020).

The Second Karabakh War was a key event in the confrontation. For the first time in the post-Soviet years, Azerbaijan is learning to produce discourses of triumph and create rituals to remember a victory rather than a defeat. However, even in the context of the discourse of "glorious victory", the image of the victim nation not only remains in demand, but also acquires new meanings.

One of the most important commemorative events from the First Karabakh War is the massacre that took place in the small town of Khojaly in February 1992, where hundreds of its inhabitants (including the elderly, women, and children) were shot dead, captured, or became refugees (Waal 169-172). In 1998, after Heydar Aliyev's decree, in Azerbaijan this event is officially called Genocide. The authorities have invested considerable resources in the commemoration of the Khojaly tragedy, fully supported by all strata of the Azerbaijani society.

Thus, within the framework of the victims' discourse, these are two acts of genocide committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis. Separate memorial days are dedicated to each of these acts: 31 March for 1918 and 26 February to commemorate the Khojaly Genocide. These and other tragic events are linked in a narrative of a century-long genocide against Azerbaijanis.

Over the years, several theatrical productions have been created and staged (*The Call of Khojaly*, *When Almonds Bloom*, *Khojaly - It Was*, etc.). In addition, documentary and feature films have been produced, including *We Will Return*, *Nabat*, *Running Away from Darkness*, and others. Many Azerbaijani and some foreign composers have created symphonies dedicated to this event (Mammad Guliyev, Tofik Bakikhanov, Azer Dadashov, Pierre Tilua, Alexander Tchaikovsky, etc.). The Azerbaijani and foreign writers have created novels and stories – *The Captive*, by Meyhosh Abdullah; *Pain*, by Amir Gut and Arye Gut, and *Black Snowdrops* by Efim Abramov. Nazim Mammadov, the author of the first cartoon shot at the Azerbaijan Film Studio, reflected this event in a painting. The small sculpture entitled *Mother's Scream*, erected in Baku in

1993 by the family of sculptors Aslan, Mahmud, and Teymur Rustamovs, was reconstructed into a nearly nine-meter monument in 2008. The monument became an endpoint for a collective memorial ritual. For several years now, mass public marches have been organized by the Azeri authorities, culminating in the laying of flowers at the monument. Years of investment in creating multiple forms of public memorial culture have contributed to the fact that every resident of the country takes part in one form or another in the Khojaly commemoration.

Future Perspectives on the Past

In any country, power plays an important role in shaping memory politics. However, in countries with democratic governments, a wide variety of independent agents are allowed into this field and the official commemorations, while dominant, are continually challenged. The key specificity of memory politics in Azerbaijan is that the political regime exercises the greatest possible control over it. The authorities guided by their own goals of increasing their legitimacy control all public spaces in the republic.

Since the establishment of the Aliyev regime in 1993, the process of suppressing political opposition and civil society has been continuous and has intensified with each passing year. In the same context, the state's control over the politics of memory and historical politics has been constantly increasing.

On the one hand, this control by the authorities has been quite common since Soviet times. On the other hand, the increasing control is justified by the need to produce a unified position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The logic of the mobilization discourse is based on the fact that in the face of the treacherous "historical enemy", the Azerbaijanis must be united. This logic has also been successfully applied to suppress political opposition and civil society. In this context, any criticism of the authorities is labelled as a "pro-Armenian" and an "anti-Azerbaijani" position.

Not only are military personnel but historians and public intellectuals are also actively involved in the production of the discourse of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as exclusive rights to territory are justified through myths about autochthony. The authorities control over academy of sciences, universities and research institutes and does not allow for dissent or formation of counternarratives. But even without this control, most historians and social researchers are unable to go beyond the boundaries of the dominant patriotic discourse in which they are willing to voluntarily demonstrate their solidarity in face of Azerbaijan's "historic enemy."

Control over history and memory increased as Heydar Aliyev's image as a "great leader" was introduced in the political and discursive space. His tenure as the Head of the KGB of the Republic and First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan (1967-1982) were rethought as activities aimed at creating the conditions for future independence, which took place fully only after his return to power in 1993. Numerous monuments and museums support this myth in public space. The Heydar Aliyev cult can flourish only under conditions of hereditary power and an authoritarian regime that does not allow alternative versions of history to enter the public space. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the authorities take controlling the past very seriously.

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